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**ON-THE-RECORD BRIEFING**

**U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Christopher R. Hill  
On Results of the Iraq National Elections**

**March 30, 2010  
Washington, D.C.  
Via Digital Video Conference**

**MS. RESIDE:** Good morning, and good afternoon, Ambassador Hill. We're pleased here in Washington to have U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hill join us from his Embassy in Baghdad. He's going to brief you on the March 7 Iraq national elections. Following his opening remarks, he'll respond to your questions. We do ask that you identify yourself before you speak and speak slowly, just to accommodate the technology.

Coincidentally, today we're also pleased to welcome to our briefing room a group of Iraqi journalists who are here in the U.S. on an International Visitors program. So we'll just let them get seated for about two seconds. And Ambassador Hill, please go ahead with your remarks and we'll turn it over to you.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here. I thought I would just keep opening remarks very brief. I think most people know the overall situation here. It's now almost three weeks since the elections. We've had an unofficial complete tally of the elections, which has yielded the plurality of seats to Iraqiya, some 91 seats. Coming in second was Mr. Maliki's State of Law coalition with 89 seats.

A big question is whether these coalitions, when they are finally seated in the parliament – we expect that sometime in the end of April – will they – will there be some reconfiguration. It is possible that there'll be some increase of one coalition or the other, so it may be that someone besides Iraqiya is actually given the first opportunity to form the government. For example, if Mr. Maliki's coalition is able to merge with another element, they could end up with more seats than Iraqiya and therefore they would have the first crack at forming a coalition.

I should say though that the issue of constructing a government, the issue of putting together broader coalitions in order to get over 50 percent of the seats in the parliament, has already begun. And everybody is talking to everybody. There is every imaginable combination, so I think we're obviously following it very closely. We've got our ear to the ground, but I think you really do need to stay tuned.

As for the level of violence, there have been some incidents. There was one in Karbala yesterday which involved two car bombs. But overall, the level of incidents is very consistent with recent months, indeed with the recent year. So there does not appear to be any uptick in violence at this time.

So maybe with those opening comments, maybe we can go to questions.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, this is Bob Burns from Associated Press. As you see the situation at the moment, what do you think are the chances that either the Prime Minister Maliki or Iyad Allawi will succeed in forming a coalition government? And if they don't, is there a third viable alternative?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I'm not really – I mean, my job is not to sort of handicap the race and determine who's going to be successful. I must say, if you talk to a lot of political observers here, they would give some odds to Mr. Maliki, some odds to Mr. Allawi, then odds to some other candidate. So there is a lot of talk about if these top two candidates are not able to form a government, whether – or who would be a third possibility. So I think at this point, it's really too early to tell.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Shaun Tandon with AFP. Mr. Maliki – Prime Minister Maliki has been quite critical of the role of the UN, alleging some fraud and calling for a more robust effort on that. What's the position of the United States on that? Does the United States believe that more needs to be done to weed out these allegations of fraud?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, this was a major league effort here. I mean, the UN put in an excellent team of people. They worked with hundreds of professional people at the High Commissioner for Elections. They've worked with literally tens of thousands of volunteers. Our view is that this was indeed a very – a very credible, a very creditable election process. So we would not share any criticism of the UN; on the contrary, we really were quite supportive of what the UN did. It was quite an effort on their part.

I will say that as in any close election, it's not easy to lose a close election. If you look at the differential, it was some 0.045 percent. That's not fun to lose an election like that. So I don't think people should be too surprised that there are some comments that reflect the anguish of losing.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, Elise Labott with CNN. I was wondering if, in fact, Prime Minister Maliki does not – is not able to form a coalition and ends up being the losing candidate, do you think he, given the close kind of narrow margin of the race, that he will, in fact, secede power to – whether it's Allawi or a third person? And what are the implications if he doesn't?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, again, these are – this is kind of speculation. What if? What if he doesn't? What if he does? What if he – will he resign from the position if he's unable to put together a coalition? All I can say is he has been very, very clear with us in private, very clear in public, that he will follow the law. I want to make very clear this is something that when you look around the landscape of this part of the world, you don't see too many examples of this

actually happening. Yet I think the Iraqi people went to the polls in great numbers and I think the Iraqi people expect all of their politicians, whether it's the seated prime minister or whether it's the challengers, to follow the letter of the law. And I think that is a widespread expectation and I would expect everyone to do that. I mean, if we have problems in the future, we'll deal with problems in the future. But right now, I think what people are saying is the right thing, which is to observe the law and observe the procedures.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ambassador. This is Susan Cornwell with Reuters. Today, the Justice and Accountability Commission has said that six candidates who won seats in the parliament should have been barred from running due to alleged ties with Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. And I just – and this commission says they will appeal to keep these winners from becoming members of parliament. And I just wondered, is this a valid challenge now coming after the election, after these people have been elected? And do you know who these six are and does it threaten – I guess the big question is does it threaten Allawi's list, his list of candidates? Are any on his list?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, let me just say that certainly political commentators here in Iraq sort of look at a challenge like that and wonder to what extent it reflects a political challenge. Certainly, I think the UN has made very clear that this is no time to be challenging people who have won seats. But I think the UN has also made very clear that the proper place for any such challenges is to the courts. If they want to sue the IHEC, they can do that and let the courts take this up.

I think going forward, certainly for the next election, certainly for the next period of Iraq's history, they're going to have to deal with this whole issue about accountability and justice. They're going to have to deal with the issue of what to do with people who have ties to the Baathist regime in the past, how they're going to deal with this, whether a South African model or some other model. But certainly, what we want to see in the future is something that is transparent and something that does not appear to many people to have politics written all over it.

**QUESTION:** Samir Nader with Radio Sawa. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. My question is: Do you have any concern about Iran's role to prevent the formation of a government to have a situation similar to what happened in Lebanon? They had successful elections, but it took a long, long time to form a cabinet. Do you have any concern about this?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yeah. I mean, the first point I'd like to make is Iraq is many things, but it's not Lebanon. And there are some real differences in Iraq from Lebanon. There are very – there are a lot of differences in the procedures of the vote. There's a lot of differences in the sort of historical antecedents that got us to this vote. So I would be careful of these sort of comparisons with another country in the region.

With respect to Iran's influence, indeed, I think all of Iraq's neighbors have an interest in these elections. All of them have weighed in in one form or the other. Clearly, we have been concerned about countries weighing in. And on the other hand, I think we have made very clear that we want Iraq to have good relations with its neighbors. It's just that its neighbors are going to have to do a better job of respecting Iraq's sovereignty. So with respect to Iran, when you

look at a map, it has an enormous border with Iraq. There's a lot of trade going on with Iran. They have a long history with each other. But what we need to see is for Iran to respect Iraq's sovereignty.

But I'd like to make one other point, which is that when you go out there and talk to people and what their expectations are for these elections, what people really talk about is they want to see a better life for themselves, for their children. They want to see the provision of some basic services. They want to see increases in electricity. They want to see a lot of things which has little to do with the sort of high politics of dealing with Iran and rather has to do with people's lives.

**QUESTION:** Paul Richter with *LA Times*. To be a little bit more specific on that, Mr. Ambassador, have you seen signs that any of the neighboring countries in this post-election period have been trying to use their influence to affect the outcome of the political jockeying now?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I mean, I think most of Iraq's neighbors have refrained from any inflammatory statements. Certainly, there are a lot of contacts going on, but frankly, there were a lot of contacts before the elections, so I think you'd be hard-pressed to say that there are more meetings in Iran or in Saudi Arabia or in Turkey or in Syria or something. I think you'd be hard-pressed to say there are more of those meetings now than there were before.

I think, pretty much, people know where people stand, where countries stand on these elections. So I can't say that there is any special change or difference in the pace or scale of the interest that these neighbors have shown in the Iraq elections. I do want to really make the point that these Iraq elections are quite historical. I mean, no one's done this kind of thing before. And the argument that there have been Iraq elections before, I think, misses the point that these were really Iraq elections that were run by Iraqis, that were the entire security mechanism. This was all done by the Iraqis.

So I would say there's an awful lot of buy-in by the Iraqi people in these elections. And so I think the ability of foreign countries to affect that buy-in, I think, is fairly limited.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, Warren Strobel with *McClatchy Newspapers*. Some of Allawi's supporters have talked publicly about a return to violence should he be denied the prime ministership or should the results of the accountability commission come back to where he's below Mr. Maliki. Do you see that as a concern that violence could take off again in a serious way?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, look, this is a country that has had a recent history with violence. I mean, we all know about the violence in Iraq. It's something we've all been very aware of for some time. So it is quite understandable that people look at this question, that people speculate about it, that the issue of violence gets raised in the news.

I would say, however, that I would be careful, though, to suggest that a coalition that has won less than a third of the seats and clearly needs to reach out and get still another 80 percent of

what the coalition is – that is, Mr. Allawi’s coalition has 91 seats. He needs at least another 70-plus seats if he’s going to make a – if he’s going to be able to form a government. Well, I think his ability to do that will depend on his ability to work with coalitions, to decide who wants what ministry, to really sit down and negotiate.

So I think this is really a political question and my sense is people understand that this is a political question. I think what is necessary at the end of the day, though, is to see that all elements of this society, whether it’s Kurdish, whether it’s Sunni, whether it’s Shia or secular, that all of these people, all of these communities, really, have a potential to participate in the political life of this country.

I think everyone is aware of this issue in this country. I mean, I don’t hear of anyone saying, “Well, let’s form a government and drop one significant group out of it.” You don’t hear any of that. So we’ll have to see. We obviously monitor these things very carefully. We’re very aware of the levels of violence. But so far, it is very much on a political track, which is where we want to keep it.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, Nicole Gaouette\* at Bloomberg News. I’m wondering if you’ve had any contacts with Allawi since the elections and, I guess, the extent of your relationship with Allawi. He’s committed to building a secular government. How is the U.S. going to help him do that if he wins?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I want to make very clear, the U.S. does not have a favorite in this election. We are prepared to work with whoever is democratically elected. Whoever observes democratic rules and is able to emerge from this process which, I’ve said many times, is more than just a few weeks. It could be – it could spill into months. So we’re prepared to work with whoever emerges. We have contacts with all of the parties, with all of the coalitions. We have very good contacts. And I would say we are in touch with political leaders on a day-to-day basis. I think that’s fair to say. And we are certainly in close contact with Mr. Allawi as we are with representatives of the other main coalitions.

**MS. RESIDE:** (Inaudible.)

**QUESTION:** Actually, that was answered.

**MS. RESIDE:** In the back. Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Mina Al-Oraibi, *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper. Ambassador, I just want to go back to the point on the meetings in Iran. I mean, I heard what you said about Iran having, of course, historic relations Iraq and influenced Iraq, but there is quite a bit of concern in Iraq as to the depth of the meetings and the long process. I mean, what’s your sense in terms of the influence that Iran is wielding in terms of actual formation of the government?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, again, I think there are a number of countries that would like to be very influential in the formation of a government, countries who have very strong views on what kind of government they have. But I think the Iraqi people have even stronger views. And

I don't think the Iraqi people would stand for a government that is not homemade. So our sense is that any Iraqi politician who ignores the will of the people who really came out very strongly in their – in this voting process, I think any Iraqi politician would be making a big mistake.

If you talk to people in Iraq, the idea of Iran having a special interest, I don't think people really accept that notion. And I would suggest that people be a little cautious about the concept that somehow this is Iran and the U.S. This is an election of, this is an election for, the Iraqi people being – and being organized by them. So I don't think the real issue here is whether some government is being made outside of Iraq. I think the real issue is can the process within Iraq yield the kind of inclusive government that I think most observers believe is the more stable and capable government that can take this country into the future.

The last four years have been a monumental four years. It's been – it's involved the full regaining of Iraqi sovereignty. It's involved beginning to have a process where Iraq was more engaged diplomatically with its neighbors. It's a process. It's a period of time that has seen dramatic reductions in the security threat here in Iraq. But I think the next four years we're going to see still further developments, especially in the economic area. So I think what the Iraqi people are looking for is a government that is interested in addressing economic problems, interested in attracting the kind of investment that's necessary there, and interested in reaching out to the various neighbors. So the issue of whether Iran or some other country is deeply involved here is not what you're hearing on the street. What you're hearing on the street is people wanting to see their politicians go forward and form a government and get on with it.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador Hill, Charlie Wolfson with CBS. Can you talk about at the – well, I know it's hypothetical in a way, but can you talk about the Kurdish role? As this plays out, do you expect any more or less involvement from them?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Oh, I think – as always, I think the Kurds have a very important role to play in these elections. First of all, the president of the country remains President Talabani until there's a new president selected. So I think you'll see President Talabani playing an important role.

The Kurds have a lot of votes. They tend to pull those votes together and work together as a Kurdish alliance. Their voting power is pretty close to what it was in the previous council of representatives; that is in the previous parliament. So I would see the Kurds playing a very important role as they get to the key question of putting coalitions together to assure not only a bare majority that is a majority of 163, but rather, I would think, that a new government would try to make that a much stronger majority than just 163. And I think you'll probably find the Kurds very much in the thick of that.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ambassador. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Can you just update us on what role Muqtada al-Sadr and his followers are playing in the election and the election aftermath, and what sort of level of power he still holds in Baghdad and the areas around?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I think we're going to see in the coming weeks, as they move forward to government formation, suffice to say at this point that the Sadrist did better than they

did before. They've certainly expanded the number of seats. I think most people believe they ran a very good campaign. They, I think, were very effective in taking advantage of open lists and putting key candidates in key positions, in key districts, to stand for election. So I think the overall sense here is the Sadrists did well. They've got some 40-something seats in the parliament. That's more than they had before, considerably more than they had before. And so I think as they get to the government formation, their alliance with ISCI, that they are going to be an important factor in it.

Now, in the previous government, the Sadrists had some positions. They had, for example, the health minister. They had, I believe, the education minister and the transport minister. I think they will insist on this sort of mix again. How far they go will be a function of the bargaining, so we have to see how that progresses.

As for Muqtada al-Sadr, he has not been in Iraq at all. He has been, as we understand it, in Qom. And we'll have to see how he plays it. We have not seen any sign that he wants to play any kind of direct role in this – in the political process here.

So I would say when you look at the results of the elections, there were, as in any elections, a few surprises. And one of the surprises was that in this INA coalition, that is, the coalition that the Sadrists had with the ISCI Party, where the Sadrists were expected to be the smaller of the two parties, that actually they ended up as the larger one. So that was one of the surprises.

**MS. RESIDE:** Okay. Any further questions?

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, Warren Strobel again. This is a somewhat election-related question. About a month ago, Under Secretary Burns went to Damascus. It was one of the highest-level U.S. visits in a while and counterterrorism was high on the agenda. And I'm just wondering whether you and General Odierno see any improvement in terms of men and materiel coming across that border in support of al-Qaida or ISI.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I think in terms of the number of people coming over the border, it has been at a low level but a low level for some time. I think the real issue that has been of concern is the degree to which Damascus has allowed fundraising of former Saddamist/Saddam regime types, whether the Syrians have allowed the continued broadcasting of television stations, that sort of issue. And without going into too many details, I'll just tell you that remains a work in progress.

**MS. RESIDE:** Any further questions? Yes, please.

**QUESTION:** Yes. Hi, Ambassador. Joyce Karam with *al-Hayat* Newspaper. I want to ask you regardless of who the next prime minister of Iraq will be, what are your expectation in regards to issues that has not been settled in the past – reconciliation, Kirkuk? What would you like to see the next government doing on these issues?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, first of all, I guess I share some of the aspirations of the Iraqi people themselves; that is, I want to see the economic – the economy picked up. I want to see a

faster pace there. Now, the last government did some very good things in terms of working with oil leases and have, I think, come up with a plan to expand the exploitation of some of Iraq's natural resources, especially oil and gas. So I think one of the things I want to see is that continued, because that will provide the financial base that the government will be able to use to provide much-needed services to the Iraqi people who have really suffered over the years. So the first thing I'd like to see is the continuation of some of these oil things, but also just an overall real attentiveness to the economy.

The second thing is my own aspirations would be to see that Iraq would really try to reach out to some neighbors and try to improve the overall atmosphere in the neighborhood toward Iraq. I think Iraq's neighbors have a responsibility to do that as well, but certainly Iraq has its share of work there. So I would hope that there would be some effort on the sort of Iraq's near abroad and working with some of the neighbors.

As you know, Iraq is still under Chapter 7 in the UN. This is tied up in the issue of various UN Security Council resolutions from the early '90s stemming from the Gulf War. Obviously, we'd like to see progress on that.

Domestically, you did put your finger on one of the main issues, which is reconciliation issues between Arabs and Kurds, and in particular it has to do with the so-called disputed internal boundary where you have some 15 different features along the Kurdish Regional Government areas and the rest of the country. And so obviously, we'd like to see some progress there. This is a tough issue. These issues didn't just happen last week; they've been around for a long time. The UN is committed to working hard to try to help the parties address these, and I think the U.S. also can play a positive role here.

So it's a rather ambitious agenda. But as the overall security situation improves, and it undoubtedly has improved, I think you start to see that there are many other issues that really need some attention. And so it should be a very – a very busy time.

**MS. RESIDE:** Any further questions?

(No response.)

**MS. RESIDE:** No further questions. Thank you very much, Ambassador Hill, for sharing your time with us.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Thank you.